

Pennsylvania, Love and Faith

From the balcony, Ted spied the backs of the women seated below, picture hats floating between their shoulder blades. Each had flanked herself with a purse and a grayish-white praybook. He had gone there, the closest church to his new Media apartment, to check out the ladies.

Something hit them, they'd splinter, he thought, signing the book passed to him by his pewmates, Dr and Mrs Marius Ohgo. After Ted x'd *newcomer*, writing his old address, the cherubic Dr Ohgo placed a beefy hand on his arm and whispered during a pause in Pastor Carruther's *Psalms Never Before or Seldom Quoted*, "You're to come with us afterwards for cookies. Mrs Ohgo's cookies are closer to heaven than even our seats here." Ted blurted acceptance and Ohgo winked, "From that far outpost, hey? Well, did you travel from Erie with any?"

Judging from Dr Ohgo's ecstatic smile, Ted's *Pardon?* was just the right answer. Was it his hunger and the talk of cookies made him smell chocolate?

They walked to the Ohgo house through showers of orange

leaves--Ted still puzzling Dr Ohgo's bizarre digs at Reverend Carruthers when Ted shook the pastor's hand. Now Ohgo, his blowing hair white in weak sunlight, was classifying Love as Ted studied identical aspects of the neighborhood's architecture: "...and I love Mrs Ohgo too and her wondrous baking--exemplified by this majestic stomach preceding me everywhere--and you'll soon see my other love. And of course, as I said, I love the God encompassing all my loves."

"Well one of your loves is different, Marius--I'll give you that!" rang back Mrs Ohgo from spinning leaves ahead. She limped, Ted noticed.

At the huge hall closet, Ted witnessed Dr Ohgo as hangermeister, separating clusters meticulously before plucking out three for their coats. Mrs Ohgo donned her long-mileage smile which spoke total forbearance; Ted shifted from foot to foot in the vaguely chocolate-smelling air. Once free of her coat, she brightened as to a batch "just ready to pop in" and limped off.

Ohgo shepherded him into the den, first having him close his eyes. Upon opening them Ted perceived smears, pink ones against thickly varnished knotty pine. He guessed they came from a small fire in the fireplace, but what sprung to focus proved to be large oil paintings of barebreasted girls in silky

boxing shorts and burgundy gloves. One resting on the floor, a taunting blond with eyes of indigo flame, stood taller than Ted, almost as if he could, with some boldness, shake her gloves and wish her luck.

"Did you travel from Erie with any?" squealed Dr Ohgo, his head an immense balloon floating against the knotty-pine, his white hair flaring in a sudden draft, his face even more scarlet.

"Not with any of these I didn't."

"The brassiere is an example of sound engineering, but God, my Erie friend, has the touch of an artist," he preached, his eyes intensely green. "Can you imagine it says in Proverbs that *their lips are smooth as oil but their legs go down to hell?* Well their legs are rooted right here, thank you. And make of this beautiful earth even more of a heaven! Am I right, Mr Erie? Did you travel here with any? Oh well, if you get it here in Media that's fine too! Would you like to name that one you seem so enamored of? I'd call her that from now on if you did."

Ohgo plopped into a director's chair facing the same painting.

"I uh..."

"No matter, tell me after Mrs Ohgo plies you with the other loveliness of the house." Dr Ohgo closed his eyes, knitted his

hands across his belly, and sighed periodically until she entered some minutes later, ushered by puffs of chocolate. "Tomorrow, Theodore!" piped Ohgo, "you'll remember that her cookies don't melt in your mouth, my dear friend, oh no! They melt your very mouth, Theodore. May I call you Theodore?"

"What did he say, dear?" interrupted Mrs Ohgo.

"That he's very very lonely."

"Well I shouldn't wonder. Isn't a shame we couldn't bring these lovely girls to life?" She put down the tray of cocoa in huge mugs splotted a creamy violet. Misshapen from her ceramic class, Ted figured, and primal as they fumed, they encircled a dish piled with steaming chocolate chip cookies, wildly aromatic.

"That'd be something all right, having them all here in the flesh: a heaven on earth, my Erie friend! Where it rightly belongs. Seek and ye shall find! I don't believe in heaven. I believe in here. I like them when they are ever so slightly burnt--the cookies not the girls--the chocolate melts in the air, *becomes* the air, the fragrance *linnnn*-gering for days. *Ahhhhhhh!* By the way, Theodore, butter, as you're finding out by the look of you, is another of Mrs Ohgo's secrets."

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Sonofabitch is a brick short of a load! is Cliff's

conclusion that next afternoon during Ted's phonecall to Gannon University's Nash Library. Did you ever figure what you traveled from here with?

Dr Ohgo's theories are pretty elastic but he did inform me, uh, mostly, that there comes a time when we must jettison our baggage or it locks to us, like in the famous logo for *Death of a Salesman*.

Yeah his sons left him babbling in the shithouse while they scooted off with whores. Sex can make you less than human.

Don't say that!

Hey it was just cookies! We got them here in Erie too!

You never know what can start you off, Cliff.

I'll second that--we're at a perilous age. But, Dr and Mrs Marius Ohgo, hey? What's he doctor of? Were the cookies shaped like tits too? I can see their coat of arms: a cross of cookies rampant on a field of breasts. Actually, he sounds like a lot of gabby, ball-breaking priests here, only they're warped by theology--I don't know their positions on breasts and women boxers. They got one on everything else, that's for sure. Wait a second, some horny *padre* wants to check out *The Joy of Sex*. How you doing, Father? No problem: he's just checking me out, actually.

I ran a secular bookstore at Gannon, and no priest

bothered me. I do recall, cynical Cliff, that a couple did have ingenious reasons for browsing Playboy, however.

You've got to watch them, tyro Ted. They're as slick as owl shit. But, meanwhile, back at the unusual Ohgo's, you...?

I swear the spoon stood straight up in the hot chocolate and whipped cream.

There was something else standing up.

Elevate your gutter mind, Cliff, 'cause I have real problems. Anyway, a nut and probably so's the wife, and I scarfed in those otherworldly cookies for hours too long while Dr Ohgo prattled on, but what the hell, I don't know anybody else down here in Media. Well, didn't before...

Ah hah! My patience with your drivél rewarded! After the pigout, the...?

Well I had catapulted myself to a sugar high, and figured a lot of black coffee'd calm me down?--I had an oat bran muffin too, at Dunkin Donuts. But then things took an even weirder turn.

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"I've been waiting a whole hour! He's a rotten bastard and you're all rot--"

"Pardon?"

"And look at *this!*" It's suppose to be fall, pretty colors

in the trees and all that shit, you know? And that total *asshole* on the TV who makes up poems about the weather? He didn't make up one for this, did he?" Wet snow clumped against the window of Dunkin Donuts, refracting headlights as cars slid into the parking lot.

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Look, I told her, I can see that you're upset.

What she say?

Then I must be the most sensitive male in this whole stupid Media, Pennsylvania--or words to that effect.

Translation: sucker.

So she asks me for a ride home, but then has to check me out with the help, which is a United Nations of giggling. You know, *Is this guy all right?* They don't know of course. Toothless Hispanic woman covered in white sugar yells, *Hey take chance, Letty! How you can do worse?*

Look! I told them. I just moved here. I come from Erie. Which was a mistake because one of them, some sort of Cambodian Negro fat girl screams *Erie? Snow up the ass, that's Erie!* Then, of course, I became Snow-Up-the-Ass until we got out of there.

And thus t'will be each and every time you return,

the tool of ridicule being the only one left for the working poor--like the gravedigger in *Hamlet*.

Spare me the Left Sociology. And especially the Literature! First thing she says getting into the car is *No funny business, you understand?* and I say look I want to get home myself.

I've had one hell of a strange day! And then she cries and cries for miles and won't tell me how to get to where she lives.

Which is information you require.

And asks me to pull over, asks me questions as to why this guy would stand her up, etc.

Maybe alien women got him. We can look for his story at the checkout.

Yeah. Whatever. Anyway there we were gazing at the woods, which she had hated just before in the quote-unquote stupid snow, and now finds beautiful because God did it and not people. Uh...the...comforting, uh, gets warmer, and man! Everything just turns furious. And at the end she cries twice as much and says she's happy because God put us together at the lowest moment of her entire life.

It had been quite a religious day for you, young Theodore. What's she look like?

A boy.

Doesn't surprise me. Are you sure you know the difference?

Probably hasn't read a book in her life. And everything is immediately emotional! Like, boom, right away. You can't think!

Let me stop you before you get to natural rhythm, you typical little suburban snot-nosed snob--but then we already know that.

Look, I don't have time for your ten-cent analysis! I seem to...*have* her now for some reason, and this is the even weirder part: I smelled chocolate at lunchtime from some brat ripping into a Hershey bar at the 7-Eleven and...did actually start getting a hardon.

Well you can't be allowed on the streets like that--not good for much but giving directions.

That passes for funny in your sealed sewer of a mind, I know, but...

Food and women! *Mmmmmm!* What you got to complain about, Ted? Smear her with chocolate and you can die a happy man. Anyway, all those tits at the mysterious and redolent Ohgos, you couldn't reign yourself in. Ah shall I compare thee to a slummer's lay?

It it it it had started as comforting, innocent, uh mostly, and went haywire and now I don't know what the hell I'm doing.

We had breakfast this morning before work, but first I picked her up at her place, and...then...before we could get out the door...Wham Bam again! I can't think! And she! She doesn't even bother. I never met a girl quite like this. No substances or bullshit needed. Out of control!

I thought such a condition was devoutly to be wished.

Well it's ripping the shit out of me. I mean this new job, man, has a lot of problems, and that's quite enough to make me nervous, thank you. I have to get down to work and knock off all this happy horseshit. I've got to catch hold and damn soon. I don't know what I'm doing. I'm sitting here now in the middle of a few thousand books they were supposed to inventory before I took over. And I thought Gannon's bookstore was screwed up! Well this Widener one is screwed up big time!

Try the personal inventory first. You're a good guy, Ted. You just have no character.

Get in control you mean, because, like, she's out of it, yes?

Or is it that she's very much in it, *o pale and loitering knight?*

Never mind the fuckin books. It's bad enough I got to peddle them. They're all shit.

And by the bye, in case you selfishly persist in

forgetting to inquire, Monsieur Snow-Up-the-Ass, I, too, exist. My news is the grownup woman I spent most weekends with has left for Florida to nurse her dying brother, so I do my wrestling with God now. It's pitiful the escapes I pull on him. He's The Man and I sucker him mercilessly!

You'll be a priest.

Join those I despise? Oh no! Trouble is, though, he has me pinned within his eyes.

Don't make any stupid poems, please Cliff! I got a hundred volumes heading for the shredder. All that soul-grating and I can't get a lousy quarter for any one!

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I swear I won't even mention Letty! But the weather here! Like, Erie has the reputation for lousy...but here it pisses mud out of the sky half the week and all of the weekend. Drips clammy gray *inside* your skull. And this is the time my boy-girl starts hinting about getting serious. I am really not ready to go to the movies with her yet--even though we've gone a bit beyond that in the few months since...but I promised not to talk about her and I'm not...uh...anymore. So how are all the Literary Lions at Gannon University?

The same pitiful mess, and Nature is without her diadem up here too: we're about fifty-fifty mud and snow from a crazy

thaw,

but it's hardening up as we're just now plummeting through zero.
Looks like a grimy abstract out there under the frozen
streetlights: how I visualize Purgatory.

I'm in it! Shit, I can't love her! Jesus Christ she's
just a girl--which you can hardly tell by looking.

Get her a pair of boxing gloves and some flashy shorts.
Or better yet, you're capable of an even more infantile image.

Cliff! Holy Jesus! I haven't had a life yet!

To be serious, Ted, friend, you're having one right now.
Who ever said it suppose to consist of big ideas? Ever think
that maybe you're lucky?

How can I be lucky and this upset? What'll I do?

Who knows? Your candle is lit and you're still cursing.

Last night I...sat in this chair and cried!

Yeah we do that sometimes.

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Ted walks past the Ohgo's, but can't ring the bell.
The early evening's bluish fog eats into dollops of snow atop
skeletal bushes flanking their front door. A buttery cloud
shoulders under.

Is there another young man in there perched in all that
rosiness and aroma? *Did you travel from Trenton with any?*

From Scranton, Philadelphia? Stockholm? Zaire? Do you find our fighting blond as overwhelming as did our friend from Erie?

Speaking of whom! And Ted sees himself in the den, sputtering "I had such a nice time, and I'm I'm I'm thinking of joining the church and had a question or two."

By then standing under a haloed streetlamp, he hears Cliff's voice saying *Belay the conscious phoniness; enough will filter through your depraved personality naturally.*

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Letty is still there in powder-blue fake fur, seated on a milk crate clotted with filthy snow and smoking a cigarette, knives of her knees wide apart. "Hey Big Shot! I was just getting ready to quit on you! Isn't this where you came in? When I was waiting for another so-called man?"

"I'm sorry. I had to go back to a place."

"What'd she say?"

"It wasn't like that. It was something else. Something I don't understand."

"Hmph! That's really overrated, that shit. What's so hot about understanding things anyway? It's what you do before you understand things that counts, and when you *don't* understand them. Who *can't* do things when they *understand* them?"

"What did you say? I don't under-"

"You heard me but don't understand." She flipped the cigarette away as they got in the car. "Can't. It's okay. You do your best, my Snow-Up-the-Ass. That's the name for you all right."

"Well mine for you is Screwball!" He started the Saturn.

"That's an easy one. For anybody. I never met anybody that one didn't fit."

They parked by a playground. The night had become clear, starlit. His Adam's apple and trousers bulged, with tension in between.

"Not tonight--nothing--I'm too down," she ended the silence. "It's probably because..." he began.

"Whoa. Shut up! I don't want you fuckin my brain anymore. And I don't wanna know why anyways. Right now it's just what is."

They gazed past the swings of the icy, glimmering, playground, through the pines and into the development beyond, the lighted houses like broken grins.

"Well I guess we better...something..." she eventually sobbed. "There's screwing your life away and there's...babies. Marriage. Heard of it?" For a frightening second her face looked gravely older.

In the cold she tucked her feet under, making herself smaller--he experienced pity for an instant before his "My God! There are so many things we'd have to talk about before...!"

"Hey! *You* talk!" She rubbed her eyes. "I'll be too old by then. Old woman--not that you wouldn't try to screw me even then. Never saw anybody had to have it more. That first night I could feel it like nothing in my life ever. Now shut up before you begin to apologize or explain!" She tugged at him to force herself, "*Mmmm!*" under his arm. "I can't tell you how good you smell! How come you always smell so sweet?"

"Ch-ch-ch-ocolate seized me one batty day."

"Yeah! That's what's it's like, a little, chocolate or something."

"And I don't appreciate your characterization of me as some sort of animal."

"Lighten up, Snow-Up-the-Ass, I'm teasing. Mostly anyways. Hey, with us it was like, instant! Explosion! So? After that, what?"

By way of answer, Ted thrust her back into her own seat, to deliver, with all the rational will he could marshal, a farewell speech laced with the highest sentiments ever announced.

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What an insight! It destroyed me! What I discovered is

what's really really crazy is the domestic shit, that's what's crazy, Cliff. I thought the way I used to live, the goddamn ravaging sexual hunger and and and the horrible loneliness and the drinking all night and running ten miles the next morning and then puking and and...well, anyway, that's really not what's crazy, really crazy. Crazy is the Ohgos and all the people dying away in their snug little bungalows with all the burners and the ovens cooking, and kids pissing in every bed! It's good I met the Ohgos, 'cause they represent the so-called home in its most insane form. I mean, girls with b-reasts, b-oxing while you get fatter and fatter? A domesticated pig? *This* I want in my future? And and and and women like Letty, offering everything up with this smartass Mona Lisa smile and getting you you babbling, and then instantly purring *Just step this way to Domestic Death!* Uh uh! Hey man I did it! I ended it and I never felt better! Like I'm burning with the feeling! Free, Baby, free!

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About a month later, Cliff had an early dinner at a German Restaurant with a Czech priest who taught philosophy at Gannon, and they argued so long afterwards--the costumed waitresses huddling and pointing--that he barely made closing time at Topsy's Terrific Tuxes. He cast the plastic-sheathed garment

into his cancerous Monte Carlo, fistailed out of boulders of squalid ice, and floored it all the way to Media.

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